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Mark Twain's Letter
to the
California Pioneers

ELMIRA, N. Y., 1869

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Mark Twain's Letter

to the

California Pioneers

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

This letter was written by Twain from Elmira, N. Y., October 11, 1869, in reply to an invitation from the New York Society of California Pioneers to attend a banquet to be given on the evening of the 13th of October, to the visiting members of the Society of California Pioneers of the Pacific Coast. (At this date, 1911, there are but two surviving members of the New York Society.)

The period described in this letter is in 1863, after which time Twain left Nevada for the Coast (San Francisco); where in the course of three weeks he became "broke"; he then became S. F. correspondent of his old paper "The Daily Territorial Enterprise," and in five months was on his feet again and had obtained a "new berth" in which he was to go to the Sandwich Islands and write some letters to the Sacramento, (Cal.) "Union."

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MARK TWAIN'S LETTER
TO THE
CALIFORNIA PIONEERS

At the banquet given by the New Yorkers [New York Society of California Pioneers] to the California Pioneers, on the evening of October 13th, the following characteristic letter was read:

Elmira, October 11, 1869.

To the California Pioneers:

Gentlemen: Circumstances render it out of my power to take advantage of the invitation extended to me through Mr. Simonton, and be present at your dinner at New York. I regret this very much, for there are several among you whom I would have a right to join hands with on the score of old friend-

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TO WIN
AMERICA

ship, and I suppose I would have a sublime general right to shake hands with the rest of you on the score of kinship in California ups and downs in search of fortune.

If I were to tell some of my experience, you would recognize California blood in me; I fancy the old, old story would sound familiar no doubt. I have the usual stock of reminiscences. For instance: I went to Esmeralda early. I purchased largely in the "Wide West," * "Winnemucca," and other fine claims, and was very wealthy. I fared sumptuously on bread when flour was $200 a barrel and had beans for dinner every Sunday, when none but bloated aristocrats could afford such

*In "Roughing It"—Chapters XL and XLI—Twain describes how he and his genial comrade and steadfast friend Calvin H. Higbie and their foreman came so near being millionaires many times over. —Publisher's Note.

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grandeur. But I finished by feeding batteries in a quartz mill at $15 a week, and wishing I was a battery myself and had somebody to feed me. My claims in Esmeralda are there yet. I suppose I could be persuaded to sell.

I went to Humboldt District when it was new; I became largely interested in the "Alba Nueva" and other claims with gorgeous names, and was rich again—in prospect. I owned a vast mining property there. I would not have sold out for less than $400,000 at that time. But I will now. Finally I walked home—200 miles—partly for exercise, and partly because stage fare was expensive. Next I entered upon an affluent career* in Virginia City, and

*Owing to the character style of his letters to the Virginia City "Daily Territorial Enterprise," written more for self amusement than anything else, the editor Mr. Goodwin offered Twain the position of City Editor at $25 per week. This was after he had yielded to Higbie's appeal to try mining once more. —Publisher's Note.

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by a judicious investment of labor and the capital of friends, became the owner of about all the worthless wild cat* mines there were in that part of the country. Assessments did the business for me there. There were a hundred and seventeen assessments to one dividend, and the proportion of income to outlay was a little against me. My financial barometer went down to 32 Fahrenheit, and the subscriber was frozen out.

I took up extensions on the main lead—extensions that reached to British America in one direction, and to the Isthmus of Panama in the other—and I verily believe I would have been a rich man if I had ever found those infernal extensions. But I didn't. I ran tunnels till I tapped the Arctic

*By "wild cat" is meant any claim not on the "Mother Lode."—Publisher's Note.

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Ocean, and I sunk shafts till I broke through the roof of perdition; but those extensions turned up missing every time. I am willing to sell all that property and throw in the improvements.

Perhaps you remember that celebrated "North Ophir?" I bought that mine. It was very rich in pure silver. You could take it out in lumps as large as a filbert. But when it was discovered that those lumps were melted half dollars, and hardly melted at that, a painful case of "salting"* was apparent, and the undersigned adjourned to the poorhouse again.

I paid assessments on "Hale and Norcross" until they sold me out, and

*In Chapter III of second volume of "Roughing It" is described in detail this most atrocious method of "salting" a mine so as to make it appear exceedingly rich to the prospective purchaser of their stock at fabulous prices "per foot."—Publisher's Note.

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I had to take in washing for a living—and the next month that infamous stock went up to $7,000 a foot.

I own millions and millions of feet of affluent silver leads in Nevada—in fact the entire undercrust of that country nearly, and if Congress would move that State off my property so that I could get at it, I would be wealthy yet. But no, there she squats—and here am I. Failing health persuades me to sell. If you know of any one desiring a permanent investment, I can furnish one that will have the virtue of being eternal.

I have been through the California mill, with all its "dips, spurs and angles, variations and sinuosities." I have worked there at all the different trades and professions known to the catalogues. I have been everything, from

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a newspaper editor down to a cow-catcher on a locomotive, and I am encouraged to believe that if there had been a few more occupations to experiment on, I might have made a dazzling success at last, and found out what mysterious designs Providence had in creating me.

But you perceive that although I am not a Pioneer, I have had a sufficiently variegated time of it to enable me to talk Pioneer like a native, and feel like a Forty-Niner. Therefore, I cordially welcome you to your old remembered homes and your long deserted firesides, and close this screed with the sincere hope that your visit here will be a happy one, and not embittered by the sorrowful surprises that absence and lapse of years are wont to prepare for wanderers; surprises which

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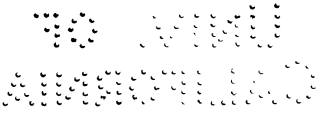
come in the form of old friends missed from their places; silence where familiar voices should be; the young grown old; change and decay everywhere; home a delusion and a disappointment; strangers at hearthstone; sorrow where gladness was; tears for laughter; the melancholy pomp of death where the grace of life has been!

With all good wishes for the Returned Prodigals, and regrets that I cannot partake of a small piece of the fatted calf (rare and no gravy,)

I am yours, cordially,

MARK TWAIN.



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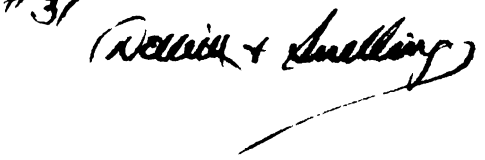

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